The Great Gatsby's Music: Origins of America's "Jazz Age"

Jazz musician and historian Chris Tyle tells the real story of America's original music.

by
Candace Brown

Imagine a balmy Saturday night in the summer of 1922, on the shores of Long Island Sound. Noises from a wild party float out from Jay Gatsby's mansion where luxury automobiles line the drive. Woven through the raucous laughter and occasional screams of hundreds of young guests, the sounds of clinking or breaking glass, the honking horns and general chaos, comes the hot dance music called "Jazz," played by a live orchestra. When S.I.T.U. members dress up for the "Great Gatsby" event this August during the summer of 2009, they'll impersonate those who lived, danced and partied during America's great "Jazz Age." As costumers, you can all picture the clothes, the jewelry, the cars and the décor, but are you as sure about the authentic sound of the music and how it came to be? Some prevailing ideas about jazz contain as much fiction as F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel.

Renowned cornetist, trumpeter, and jazz historian, Chris Tyle, has devoted his life to the music that began in New Orleans and made its way into *The Great Gatsby*. For more than a decade Tyle led the Silver Leaf Jazz Band in the French Quarter of New Orleans, playing nightly at the Can Can Café in the Royal Sonesta Hotel. He now lives in his hometown of Portland, Oregon and performs in many bands across the country and abroad, including his new West Coast version of the Silver Leaf Jazz Band, and as musical director of Combo de Luxe. S.I.T.U. member Candace Brown plays banjo and guitar in both groups and her husband, David Brown, plays bass. For the benefit of S.I.T.U. members, Brown recently interviewed Tyle to get some background on the jazz music guests would have danced to at Gatsby's parties.

Brown: When did what we think of as the earliest jazz really come about?

Tyle: There's no real documented evidence of that. The prevailing consensus is some time in the vicinity of 1895 to 1900.

Brown: What about the development of syncopation and rhythm in jazz? Many people believe it came from Africa.

Tyle: Well, that's one of those difficult things to say. There's nothing in jazz that has anything to do with African music per se. But people don't realize that if the music started in New Orleans (and I go along with that one hundred percent), a lot of those people of African descent were separated from Africa by many decades. And even

though before the Civil War they were allowed to meet in "Congo Square" in New Orleans and indulge in playing music, that was still a good 45-50 years before jazz appeared. The consensus is that it's a totally American invention. Yes, there are roots in Africa, there are roots in Europe, there are roots in the Caribbean, but it's a complicated thing.

I think the rhythm in jazz comes from Baptist churches. And I think that's why so many people were hoity-toity about it and saying it was the devil's music because they didn't like the fact that they had taken church music, spirituals and that sort of thing, and converted it from a vocalized music to instrumental. You also had ragtime happening simultaneously, originating in an area in Missouri. So you had that syncopation from the ragtime and also a certain kind of syncopation and rhythmic feel in the churches.

Brown: What was going on in New Orleans that contributed to the birth of jazz?

Tyle: You see, in New Orleans there was a huge tradition of what they called "Creole people of color." They were descendents of people of Spanish or French ancestry and African-Americans. They tended to consider themselves a separate culture from blacks, a certain sort of elite class and they adopted genteel mannerisms. In fact, prior to emancipation it was not uncommon for Creoles of color who were free to have black slaves. But after *Plessy* v. *Ferguson*, all of a sudden they were no longer considered to be their own separate class. They were lumped together with black people, who were doing a different thing musically, with little or no emphasis on reading music or the European tradition.

Note: Although "Jim Crow" laws had segregated most of the south for some time, the races still mingled quite freely in New Orleans until 1890 when more attention and disapproval was focused on the situation in that city. In that year the Louisiana legislature passed a bill that said blacks and whites could no longer ride in the same railcars. In 1892 a light-skinned Creole man named Plessy, who was one-eighth black, challenged the law by sitting in the "whites only" section. He was arrested, tried and convicted, with the conviction upheld in the U.S. Supreme Court case of Plessy v. *Ferguson in 1896. That changed everything for Creole musicians in New Orleans.*

Tyle: A real important point is that jazz started out as basically an improvised music. So you have these Creole musicians, highly trained and skilled, who no longer necessarily have to work with Creole orchestras where they'd be reading music. They could "jump the line" as it was called. They could say "well, this is very interesting. These guys are playing and they're not using any music. I want to try that. If I can do that, I can do the reading jobs with the orchestra and also do this other stuff."

Brown: So then it's about economics.

Tyle: That's what people don't understand about New Orleans. It's ALWAYS about economics. It had nothing to do with art at that time. Jazz bands always performed a function. There wasn't some kind of artistic thing, no concerts per se. They played for people dancing or maybe at a party. Brass bands played for funerals and added that jazz

element. In other words, it's just like it is today. Somebody wants some music for a party or whatever.

Prior to the advent of the jazz band there were string groups that played for small parties. In New Orleans they had what they called a "string trio" and this was very common. They'd have violin, string bass and guitar, or mandolin, guitar and string bass, or maybe violin, guitar and mandolin. A lot of the guys that became jazz musicians had played stringed instruments at one time. There were a lot of things going on. All too often people want to say it's just one thing but it's really very complicated. What ended up being recorded isn't necessarily indicative of what was going on in the mainstream world.

People think in New Orleans they always had seven-piece bands -- but that isn't true. A lot of time they had six-piece bands because there was no piano or the piano was horribly out of tune. There were very few piano players in the early days of jazz in New Orleans. It was more likely that they would have a violin player than a pianist. Jelly Roll Morton wasn't all that well known in New Orleans and at one time played trombone so he could work with bands. The piano was considered a "sissy" instrument. You hear all this about pianists playing jazz in the brothels but that's not really true. Sometimes there were pianists but not necessarily playing jazz or ragtime. They might do that when they got off work. In Storyville there were cabarets where a pianist might go play with a cornet player or another instrument.

Brown: Let's talk about the evolution of "jazz bands" and the importance of the dance craze in this picture.

Tyle: People have this concept of the 1920s being the "jazz age" and that there were seven-piece jazz bands playing everywhere -- but that wasn't the case at all. Even by the early 1920s there were what were called "dance bands." They could be as small as a trio but generally that term referred to a larger band. The instrumentation could be anything, like saxophones, maybe one or two trumpets, a trombone, and a full rhythm section. Those were the majority of bands that were playing in the mainstream.

Very fast changes were happening to the music. Up until the early 1920s the New Orleans bands we'd basically think of as a "New Orleans style jazz band" would be a six-piece band, where the cornet plays the lead, clarinet plays a contrapuntal part to that, the trombone is playing fills to what's going on with that and the rhythm section is playing either in two beat or four beats. They would have string bass. That's another thing people don't understand. They would use the brass bass in the marching bands. Brass bass didn't come into use in dance bands until they needed a brass instrument that would fill a ballroom, so the heyday of tuba was 1922-1929. The dance thing is really important. It's important going back to New Orleans. There were so many people involved with dancing that they built these huge ballrooms. They built ballrooms big enough to handle all these people and, since there was no amplification in those days, obviously they had to have bands big enough to fill the space.

There's an interesting thing that happens in the '20s. There was a band in New Orleans led by a violin player named Armand Piron and they made a number of recordings during 1923-25. They were hired to play at the Roseland ballroom in New York. They were the first New Orleans jazz band to play at that venue. I think they're the ones who really brought New Orleans jazz to New York. They were almost all Creoles

and what they played was a very refined type of jazz. If people listen to that music it's not as swinging as, let's say, the King Oliver band, but it's certainly jazz, not something else, and it was played in the New Orleans manner. I think that band had a huge effect on the musicians in New York.

Brown: When did bands start functioning as we do now, with kind of an order to things where after the opening ensemble chorus, each following chorus will feature a different instrument taking an improvised solo? How did that evolve?

Tyle: There were bands like the King Oliver band in Chicago that were doing a lot of improvised ensembles. There weren't really a lot of solos. Then there were all these young guys in Chicago who would go hear these bands. And they'd get together later and they'd play these tunes. But they'd play solos on them rather than having it all ensemble like in the King Oliver band.

Brown: When you say "improvised ensembles" was it just kind of a big cacophony of sound, everybody doing their own thing?

Tyle: That's the way some people do it now, but in those days everybody knew exactly how to do it. And that's something that is really lost. In the late 1920s and 1930s there were a number of things going on. There were bands playing in ballrooms for people to dance. These people wanted to hear the latest songs with a few old chestnuts thrown in. Music publishers had all these pop tunes they wanted to be hits. So what do they do? They take them to a recording studio to be recorded by bands that existed for that purpose. So when guys like Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey (who were jazz players but also crackerjack readers) would go into the recording studios, they'd have stock arrangements by the companies that published the tunes. As the 1920s progressed they started out pretty straight, with things basically harmonized. But then they'd give a guy eight bars and he'd take a jazz solo on it. Taken as a whole the arrangement wasn't really jazz, but that solo was. Guys would say, "Oh, you want me to play the 'jazz.'" So what happened is that whereas in the past they were all playing improvised music together, parts got sectioned off to be played by certain members of the band. They originally could have been very straight readings of a tune played by a larger band, then suddenly there are these little snippets of jazzy things.

F. Scott Fitzgerald set his novel in the summer of 1922, a year when exciting changes shook up the world of popular music, with many more to come. In that year a young cornet player named Louis Armstrong left his home town of New Orleans to travel to Chicago's South Side. He'd just been hired to play alongside his hero, cornetist Joe Oliver, in "King Oliver's Creole Jazz Band" at the Lincoln Gardens dance hall. Among the excited listeners that year and beyond were a number of young white male musicians who would go on to become big names in the history of jazz -- guys like Bix Beiderbecke, Benny Goodman, Jimmy McPartland, Gene Krupa, George Wettling, Muggsy Spanier, Mezz Mezzrow, Eddie Condon, and others.

Also in 1922, the smooth sound of the Fletcher Henderson orchestra began to fill the

ballroom at the Club Alabam in New York City. Although this was an African-American band in a time of widespread prejudice, they would become hugely popular, and by 1924 would move to the more prestigious Roseland Ballroom, when Armand Piron's band returned to New Orleans. In that year Henderson finally got his wish, and the young Louis Armstrong left Chicago to join this orchestra.

Brown: Do you give Armstrong a lot of credit?

Tyle: Oh yeah. Absolutely. Now, you also have to give Fletcher Henderson a lot of credit for deciding to do this. Because here's Louis Armstrong, he's 23 years old and Henderson had already asked him to move to New York when he was 19. He'd heard him in New Orleans and he wanted him to come to New York, but Louis said no. He didn't want to do that. When Louis started out he wasn't a soloist. But by 1924 at the urging of his wife Lil Hardin he goes to New York and the rest is history. He's a great musician, who had some great stuff going on musically and recording wise, but his jobs had been just kind of humming along. Then when he joins Henderson's band, all of a sudden his influence really changes things.

Having different guys take solos, that all started with Louis Armstrong with Fletcher Henderson in 1924. Already the Fletcher Henderson band had guys who were playing solos before Louis joined, but soon it started becoming a bigger thing. You'd have this arrangement with these wonderful little moments when Louis would come in and take an improvised break.

He made the biggest impact on jazz. He set the design for what later became the standard situation of having a soloist in front of a big band, like Benny Goodman or Artie Shaw. When Louis began to play in Fletcher Henderson's band, that was the real beginning of what one would think of as big band jazz.

Thanks to Chris Tyle, when you attend this year's Great Gatsby event you'll have a better appreciation for the origins of the uniquely American music that would have filled Gatsby's mansion during the "Jazz Age." Read more about Chris Tyle and how he has both honored, and contributed to, our nation's jazz heritage, at his website: www.tyleman.com. He can be reached at 503-380-5507. The website for Combo de Luxe is : www.combodeluxe.net